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AUTHOR Laird, Angela
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that communication researchers could benefit from incorporating a rules approach as a supplement to more traditional methods of organizational analysis. Two major flaws in the methodology of traditional organizational analysis are noted: failing to account for actor or participant meanings--how the actor interprets relationships, roles, and interactions; and focusing too exclusively on organizational structures at the expense of the process that actors use to make sense of environmental input. The basic assumptions and constructs of a rules approach to organizational analysis are explained, centering on the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory advocated by W. Pearce and V. Cronen in 1980. An example of an organizational study using the CMM approach is offered to show how a rules conception of human action has the potential to make all of a researcher's data more interpretable. (Author/RL)

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A RULES APPROACH AS A SUPPLEMENT TO ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Angela Laird
Assistant Instructor
University of Kansas

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to argue that researchers could benefit from incorporating a rules approach as a supplement to more traditional methods of organizational analysis. This is true because traditional methods suffer from two major flaws. First, they fail to account for actor or participant meanings. Second, they focus too exclusively on organizational structures at the expense of the structuration process that actors use to make sense of environmental input. I explain the basic assumptions and constructs of a rules approach, centering on the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory, advocated by Pearce and Cronen (1980). I offer an example of an organizational study using the CMM approach. Methods using a rules conception of human action better incorporate actors' meanings and explain the structuration process. The data obtained from such an approach can potentially make all of a researcher's data more interpretable.

When Alexander and Penley (1980) titled their paper, " A Note on the Importance of How One Measures Organizational Communication," they touched on a vital issue affecting the validity of the results we obtain in our research in organizational communication. From time to time various scholars have taken reflexive examinations to determine flaws in our research methods. However, the majority of these introspective analyses have focused on specific methods of data collection and analysis. In this paper I propose instead to examine the assumptions that undergird many of our research efforts. These assumptions have profound effects on the types of inferences we can validly draw from our studies. Specifically, I will argue that current organizational communication research suffers from two major flaws. First, our research too often ignores actors' interpretations and meanings for relationships, contexts, and interactions. Secondly, communication research has tended to focus too exclusively on structures at the expense of the structuration process. This focus on structures dominates many of the major research tools such as the ICA Audit. After examining these two characteristics of current research, I will propose an alternative, that I feel can remedy many of the ills that afflict our research. This alternative is a rule-based approach to communication research, exemplified by the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory, articulated by Cronen and Pearce (1978). This approach to research is designed to incorporate actors' meanings, focusing on the processes that individuals use to structure and coordinate meanings.

What I primarily wish to argue is that rule-based methods can make a valuable addition to the research methods we currently use. I certainly am not trying to argue that all current research methods are hopelessly

inadequate, and should be discarded. I simply wish to make the point that because of the assumptions that undergird them, they are limited in their ability to support certain inferences that we need to be able to draw from our research. Therefore a combination of rule-based methods with our existing techniques, will help us to interpret our data more accurately, and provide more practical ability to apply our research in given organizations.

ACTORS' MEANINGS

One major weakness of our current research is that we make little attempt to discover how the actor interprets his relationships, roles, and interactions. We fail to consider this vital variable, even though a broad and diverse group of theorists in the social sciences have written on the importance of the constructive role of the actor in creating meaning. Kaplan (1974) draws the distinction between act meaning and action meaning. Act meaning is the meaning that a given act has to the human actor who is directly involved. Action meaning is the meaning of the same act for the scientist-observer. Kaplan stresses that act and action meaning may not be the same. This possible disparity should caution us against making interpretations based solely on observation. A reason for the difference of act meaning is explained by Hale and Hilpert (1976). They posit that man is an active creator of subjective meaning, not solely an information processing machine or a reactor to provided environmental stimuli. As part of their argument for cognitive-constructivist research models, they point out that all too many of present research instruments provide a frame of reference, by the way questions are posed, that is not the subject's own frame of reference. Blumer (1969) explains that actor interpretation and its impact on action:

> Fundamentally, action on the part of a human being consists of taking account of various things that he notes and forging a line of conduct on the basis of how he interprets them. The things taken into account cover such matters as his wishes and wants, his objectives, the available means for their achievement, the actions and anticipated actions of others, his image of himself, and the likely result of a given line of action. (p. 15-16).

Three particular research methods, frequently used in organizational research,particularly fail to take account of actor meanings. These include "sanitizing" our contexts, relying on quantification, and overemphasis on objectivity.

In our research we often strive for generalizability, and mistakenly feel that the only way for our results to be generalizable is to strip away the "contaminating" effects of a particular context. We thus place people in a controlled environment, and screen out normal environmental noise, so that we can examine a pure reaction to a given stimuli. What we often fail to realize is that a given context forms an inextricable part of the action performed within it. Goffman (1959, 1969) writes often on the influence of context. He explains that people often experience situations as problematic. Faced with ambigous situations, people define situations and make sense of them based on internal criteria. Delia et. al. (1975) provide support for the idea that context-specific factors influence an individual's overall evaluation of a person or event. Thus excluding consideration of how the individual views the context of his action ignores much of the meaning of his act. Meanings and evaluations are situationally determined by actors, yet our research methods often make every attempt to strip away context-relevant material in an effort to improve generalizability.

Another common research practice called into doubt by the existence

of act meaning is overreliance on quantification of the amount of communication as a sufficient description of that communication. Many of our research tools measure communication primarily in amount. For example, out of 134 questions suggested by Goldhaber and Rogers (1979) for the ICA Audit procedure, 83 of them deal with amount of information. Yet by merely tabulating the amount of communication, the researcher may know little about the nature or meaning of that communication without tapping the actors' meanings for the communication event. An analogous research problem may serve as an example. Cronen Johnson, and Lannamann (1980) conducted research on the phenomenon known as the double bind. A double bind can be defined as a situation in which one party is expressing two conflicting levels of meaning which the other party cannot resolve or ignore, even though he/she finds it important to do so. They point out that previous research on double binds conducted by the Palo Alto group and others had been highly ambiguous because of seemingly contradictory research results. This previous research had focused primarily on the number of double binds, yet some researchers had concluded that double binds were harmful, while others had disagreed, citing beneficial effects of double binds. Cronen, Johnson, and Lannamann, used a rules approach that considered how actors processed and reacted to situations involving double binds. They found that some actors interpreted the double bind as a dead end and a limiting experience, while others viewed it as a challenge, and a stimulus to more creative approaches. Thus the researchers who only counted the amount, and did not study the nature, as determined by actor interpretation, could not adequately process the meaning of their data. Similarly, research which focuses primarily on amount of communication in organizations, may not be able to interpret the meaning of the amount which it is able to quantify. For example,

a communication auditor may be able to document that a supervisor only sends his subordinate five written communications in a one-month period, but cannot tell whether that amount is positive or negative without considering how the members of that organization feel about written communication.

A final research practice which should be scrutinized for its failure to account for actor meaning is behavioral research with its overreliance on objectification. Alexander and Penley (1980) describe two types of research that are most predominant in organizational communication literature. The first is what they term dependent outcomes. This type of research centers on evaluations, or reactions, to organizational communication. It attempts to determine satisfaction, or some other such reaction, to communication events. Penley and Alexander quite rightly point out that such research, because of its conclusionary character is not useful because it cannot be manipulated or even adequately explained, as to cause. Of course evaluation in itself gives no real cue as to actor's meanings. Knowing that an actor is satisfied with a certain relationship or channel of communication gives no clue what the actor means by satisfaction, nor why he is satisfied. However, Alexander and Penley feel that the second type of research is the solution to escape the vagueness of evaluative research. They describe this second type as independent or behavioral research. They stress that the researcher should rely as much as possible on direct observation of organizational behavior, using indirect reports of such behavior only when necessary. They argue that behavior-based research is superior because it can be manipulated and because it provides a more objective base for consulting. The importance of actors' meaning denies the premises underlying Alexander and Penley's championship of behavioral research. By relying on outward behavioral manifestations of interaction, the researcher is able only to determine

action meaning, but cannot begin to know the act meaning for the actors. Harre and Secord (1973) express a very similar objection, when they use Kenneth Burke's terms to argue that action cannot be reduced to motion. Action has meaning and purpose, whereas motion is only the outward display and result of such meanings. Giddens (1976) stresses the importance of commonsense understanding. He explains that interactions are meaningful for the participants because they both draw upon a pool of common knowledge, information, and rules that competent actors are expected to know and apply in a particular situation. An outside observer does not have access to this commonsense understanding, and thus his interpretation of the behavior he observes in the situation may not be complete. Certainly all of us have been involved in a situation in which we overheard conversation which we misinterpreted because we did not understand the context in which others were speaking. Such misunderstanding can only be expected when researchers rely on their own observation without considering the meaning and the purposes for those motions from the perspectives of the participants.

The most important point to be stressed in considering the necessity of including actors' interpretation in our research is the difference it makes in our results. Delia and Swanson (1976) write that research should "preserve . . . the pre-theoretical meaning-structure of the original events (acts) being observed." (p. 22). We cannot preserve that meaning structure without considering the individual who created it for some purpose. In addition, actors' meanings can serve to distort the collection of data by traditional means. Delia, Gonyea, and Crockett (1971) give one example. They point out that concepts and gradients of a semantic differential will be interpreted by the subject in a manner that is functional and relevant for that individual, but not necessarily functional or relevant for the

experimenter or other subjects. Thus we cannot be sure what the actor means when he marks a category which is pre-determined by the researcher. We need to develop a research method which will allow the actor to generate his own categories, and will probe what the actor means by his response.

FOCUS ON STRUCTURE

One other limitation is that organizational communication research has centered too exclusively on structure at the expense of the structuration process. This focus can be easily demonstrated by a brief review of leading current research. For example, over fifty papers were submitted for possible presentation at the ICA convention last year. Of those papers, over two-thirds dealt with some type of structural or systems analysis or else did an analysis of role. No paper that I reviewed made any significant attempt to examine the actor's structuration process.

This focus on organizational structures is institutionalized in the tools we use to gain data. Perhaps the research instrument most widely accepted and most dilligently researched by eminent scholars in our field has been the ICA Communication Audit. Certainly this instrument has provided several valuable steps forward in organizational research. The information provided by such an audit has its uses. But the ICA Audit, too, is limited by its reliance on assumptions which preclude consideration of act meaning. I previously discussed that the greatest bulk of the Audit seeks only to determine measure of the amount of information. Of course, I have argued that measures of the amount of communication are meaningless without knowledge of how the information is perceived or used. 83 of the 135 possible questions suggested by Goldhaber and Rogers (1979) in their recent revision of the audit instrument, deal with amount of information needed or received. 11 more of the questions simply seek demographic information. 31 other questions ask the respondent to indicate amount of satisfaction. These questions

are not only suspect because they are only a measure of amount, but also because they seek to determine the evaluative effects, which, as Alexander and Penley (1980) point out, are difficult to evaluate or use. Only five questions make any attempt to determine the quality of information, and these questions only seek to determine the timeliness of information from key sources. These questions, of course, make the a priori assumption that timely information is good, an assumption which is imposed by the researcher without an attempt to validate the assumption with the actor. From this numerical breakdown, I think it is safe to conclude that the major thrust of the questionnaire is to determine amount of information. The instrument makes no attempt to determine quality or meaning of information to the actor.

Of course proponents of the Audit would point out that the Audit is composed of five methods of data collection, not just the questionnaire, yet the same bias toward amount and structure characterizes most of these five methods. Network analysis only determines a person's place in the formal and informal structure of the organization. The communication diary only quantifies the numbers of various communication behaviors, but cannot explain their meaning, or the way that competent actors interpret them. The standardized interview schedule, like the questionnaire is biased toward certain types of information. The interviewer primarily attempt to ascertain structural relationships, types of information, and evaluative outcomes to communication events. There are no questions which specifically call on the individual in the organization to explain what perceptions guide his own behavior in the organization, or what his images are of what acceptable behavior is.

Only the critical incidents come close to asking the actor to explain what responses mean, by granting him/her the opportunity to describe

specific behavior. However, although the critical incidents are certainly a step in a direction I would advocate, they still do not allow the researcher a chance to examine how the individual structures these individual incidents into a hierarchy of contexts which create order and meaning. These individual critical incidents also do not completely allow the investigator an insight into how the individual negotiates meaning with others in the organization. Negotiation, or interaction of meaning, is very important. Blumer (1969) defines social order as the process of joint action. He states that "...identities are created or transformed and objects and events are given meaning as they become incorporated in ongoing interaction." (p. 23).

This emphasis on structure, demonstrated by the direction of our studies, and institutionalized in our data collection tools, is flawed for two reasons: 1) it ignores the interaction between actor and role and 2) it freezes structuration processing, focusing only on a static result of on-going interaction.

First, a reliance on structure ignores the person who forms the structure. Turner (1962) describes the behavior of humans as role making rahter than role playing. Stokes and Hewitt (1976) indict structural explanations for behavior that are concerned centrally with analysis of social organization, patterns of interchange, and dependency between structural units. In these structural models, social action is treated simplistically and explained only as an enactment of the structure. On the contrary, Stokes and Hewitt argue that modern man is equipped by his socialization with a diffuse capacity to read social cues and respond in a situationally appropriate fashion, rather than with extensive normative content. This flexibility in inevitable given the vast number of contingencies in complex societies. Thus the structure of an organization is not the

motivating force which constrains given actions. Rather the structure may serve as a stimulus for man to improvise appropriate behavior. Collins (1975) probably describes the problems with structural theories the best. He asserts that explanations must come down to the individual level. Structural theories reify a position or role. The slot becomes more important than the person who fills it. The role becomes a social being rather than a position filled by a real person in a real context. Collins argues that such a reliance on role makes man into a "cultural dope."

Secondly, such a focus on structure ignores the actors' structuration processes. Weick (1979) originated the perspective of communication as the process of organizing. This perspective is attracting growing interest among scholars in organizational communication. Weick points out that meanings can only be contextually defined. The equivocality of environmental cues is reduced when the actor is able to provide and construct contexts for such stimuli. Communication is an effort to structure such contexts. Johnson (1977) defines communication as the process of constructing meanings and expectations through the exchange of messages. She explains:

> ...when I communicate with another, I construct for myself the meaning of messages we are exchanging; I also construct for myself expectations about what I should do and what the other may or should do. (p. 4).

When this individual process is seen on an organizational level, it takes the form of organizational intelligence, and organizational integration, according to Johnson. Organizational intelligence is the consensual meanings shared by any particular organization of individuals. Organizational integration is the consensual expectations which they understand and share. Putnam and Sorenson (1981) conclude this Weickian perspective, saying, "the structural features of messages are interwoven into the behavioral fabrics

of interactional ties of organizational members." (p.2). What Weick, Johnson, Putnam, and Sorenson are all saying is that the structures of meaning are created in a complex, ongoing process which interrelates actors, relationships, and contexts. Only by examining this interactional process are we able to understand the nature of structures.

A RULES APPROACH

Having explained what I see as the limitations in current research assumptions, I would offer a constructive alternative. A rules approach to communication research can serve as a supplement to current research methods to improve interpretability and applicability of research findings. Harre (1974) states the basic assumptions of a rules approach:

> Human social behavior I believe to be an essentially cultural phenomenon, the intellectual response of an intelligent, self-aware species to the problems of living posed to them by peculiarities of their biology and of their environment on earth. The method by which human beings manage their affairs, and create society, is by the invention and promulgation of rules, in the following of which social behavior is generated. (p. 143).

One rules approach to communication research is the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory, created by Pearce and Cronen (1980). They describe man's creation of structure in terms of a hierarchy. Just as Weick explained, mand must create structure in order to resolve ambiguity. Pearce and Cronen's hierarchy is composed of overarching rule structures, each of which serves as the context for the level below it. At the top level, people within a culture share archetypes, culturally shared knowledge and expectations. These archetypes help to determine an individual's life script, which is the next lower level. The life-script is composed of the rules of behavior and meaning which are most central to an individual's self concept. The life script in turn serves as the context in which the individual interprets episodes, the next level. Pearce (1976) defines an

episode as "any part of human life, involving one or more people, in which some internal structure can be determined." (p. 21). Episodes are determined by the actor. For example, a jostle in a high school hall may be interpreted differently for different actors. For a member of the gang, the roughhousing may "count" as "friendly comradery" whereas the newcomer may perceive the same action as "threatening behavior." In either case the life script of the individual is the context which helps to clarify the meaning. The episode serves as the context in which individuals interpret speech acts, constructs, and lower levels of the hierarchy. Thus a given utterance will depend for meaning on the episode in which it is uttered.

This hierarchy of rules for meaning and conduct which the individual creates is an explanatory structure which can better incorporate actors' meanings into the research process. It can also explain the processes that the individual uses to structure the experiences to which he/she is exposed. But an individual's rule structure is only the start of the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory. Once an investigator has some insight into a single subject's hierarchy, he is ready to analyze the interaction of two individuals. Communication is the effort of two individuals to coordinate their rule structures. Just as rules govern individual meaning, rules also govern this coordination process. Searle (1970) describes two categories of rules. Constitutive rules link beliefs to one another and link behaviors to beliefs. They indicate how one belief may "count-as" another superordinate belief. Regulative rules guide actions and bring about outcomes. They provide the latitude of acceptable behavior within a given episode. Rules vary in their latitude of acceptance from prohibited to obligatory with several stages in between.

How the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory works in practice may

best be shown by describing a study which used this approach. O'Brien (1980) investigated the rules governing promotability within a corporation. She attempted to discover the basis for the hierarchy for the individuals in the corporation, by trying to determine if the members of the organiztion shared an organizational archetype for promotability. She found that the majority of the members did share such an archetype for promotable behavior. She then set out to determine if knowledge of the archetype was shared equally by men and women. She found that men in the corporation had a much higher level of consensus with the organizational archetype than did women. O'Brien then examined episodes within the organization to determine why women failed to understand what behaviors the organization as a whole agreed affected promotability. She found that women interacted with fellow employees in different types of episodes than did men. They were less likely to be included in episodes which were defined by members as informal discussions, in which expectations of the corporation were often discussed. This study provided a major insight into the workings of this corporation, and into the understanding of its members. I would not have been possible had not Ms. O'Brien made an attempt to understand what episodes and behaviors meant in the particular organization.

A rules approach examplified by the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory offers several advantages to the researcher. It provides him/her with a means to generate the categories of research tools directly from the participants involved. It also gives the researcher a greater insight into the communication interactions within the organization because he/she can understand the interpretation of each of the participants,and how they share and disagree on the rules involved. Most importantly, an attempt to understand the rules structure of the actors gives the researcher access to

the context, which is the main determinant of meaning. Such an insight will make data derived from various research procedures more meaningful and interpretable.

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